

Why the Music “Put [Him] All A-Tune”: Wagner’s *Lohengrin* and the Politics of Cultural Segregation in Du Bois’s “Of the Coming of John”

Erika R. Williams

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“Of the Coming of John,” the thirteenth and penultimate chapter of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (and one of five new pieces he wrote specifically for *Souls*) is a short story commonly read as a dramatization of the identity crisis sustained by the “New Negro” who, having ostensibly achieved a new level of sovereignty, is newly expressive of a personal consciousness and racial conscience that leaves her at the margins of history, culture, and politics – caught between the ‘old’ world of slavery and the ‘new’ if inchoate world of what Alain Locke described as “spiritual emancipation” (Sundquist, 335). In moving from the conventional discussion of the New Negro movement in the context of the 1920’s to the turn-of-the-century period of the publication of *Souls*, I follow Eric J. Sundquist and J. Martin Favor among others in re-periodizing the New Negro movement such that it might be extended to include the post-bellum period as well as the 1920’s era that is traditionally viewed as the period of the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance. In his foundational book, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of*

American Literature, Eric J. Sundquist explains that

Because of its association with Alain Locke’s famous 1925 anthology of black writing by the same name, the New Negro has often been associated by modern readers solely with the generation of creative and culturally independent black intellectuals and artists who appeared in the aftermath of the First World War, a period loosely described by Alain Locke as the Negro Renaissance and by subsequent critics as the Harlem Renaissance. The term has earlier and more diverse uses, however, and it is tempting to speak of two Negro periods, differentiating between the more economically

successful, politically active generation of the later period and the generation associated with Booker T. Washington, many of whom also invoked the term. The New Negroes of the 1920's were likely to define themselves as self-consciously progressive and politically radical in comparison to the seemingly more accommodationist "Old Negroes" of Washington's era; [...] Yet when it came to such generational distinctions, reality was often difficult to separate from stereotype. As Locke wrote in the introductory essay of his collection, the Old Negro was "more of a myth than a man... [...]" The New Negro [...] was achieving a "spiritual emancipation" and appeared to be slipping out "from the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority." (334-5)

Tracing the New Negro movement back to 1903 – to the era when Du Bois produced and published the groundbreaking *Souls*, a text combining history, political theory, autobiography, and literature – allows me to retroactively read Du Bois's *Souls* as a whole and "Of the Coming of John" in particular as literary preludes to the 1920's New Negro rhetoric he espoused in such texts as "Criteria of Negro Art." One could say that Du Bois's literary writing in 1903 anticipated the more pointedly polemical writing he would do in the 1920's—and even beyond.

What is important here is less a patently temporal—and linear—demarcation of an historical change than an emerging paradigmatic change in the hearts, minds, and lives of African-Americans. The nature and scope of such a change – the forms a "spirit of rebellion" and a "spiritual emancipation" might assume and the significance of those forms to the development of modern black subjectivity – are of central importance to "Of the Coming of John," and they constitute the bases of my analysis of it.

A brief summary of Du Bois's story is in order: John, "a long straggling fellow, [...] brown and hard-haired," leaves Altamaha, his home on the coast of Georgia, to attend

Wells Institute, a black college in the aptly named city of Johnstown. After completing an educational apprenticeship that is punctuated by an aesthetic interlude in which he briefly appreciates Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* in a New York City music hall, John returns home to work on behalf of his people, only to find himself alienated both from the white and the black communities. Presumably too educated, "cultured," and endowed of a "New Negro" consciousness to sustain himself in an environment rife with contradiction, John is caught between the poles of white racism and "old Negro" provincialism denoted respectively by the white leaders who fire him for teaching black children about the French Revolution and the "Negroes [who] [...] rent into factions for and against him" (152) neither regret nor protest his loss. The climax of the story is marked by failure and fatality: jobless and wandering aimlessly, John discovers the "other" white John molesting his sister. John kills his sister's attacker, and at the story's end, is awaiting his murder by a charging lynch mob. As he turns toward the sea and waits to die, John remembers the refrains of the bridal march from *Lohengrin*: "With an effort he roused himself, bent forward, and looked steadily down the pathway, softly humming the 'Song of the Bride' ..." (154).

Considering this story as a representative of the process of becoming a "New Negro," one is compelled to acknowledge it as a "failed"—or at the very least, a frustrated—example of such, a move that recalls the critical characterization of the New Negro Renaissance as a "failure." As Arnold Rampersad notes in *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, a central theme in "Of the Coming of John" is "the dilemma of the

educated black aspirant to culture, whose strivings are frustrated by injustice” (75). One central cause of the inability of the modern black subject to fully concretize her “New Negro” status is the fact of segregation, which, in its legal formulation, maintained by the institutional strictures of Jim Crow, is a persistent relic of “Old Negro” ideology. By this logic, the praxis of the “New Negro” would counter the antiquated institution of segregation, proffering desegregation or integration in its stead.

Yet in trying to establish the particular parameters of New Negro subjectivity, the modern black subject has also to contend with the limitations of the strategy of integration and thus, to consider the relative merits of voluntary segregation, or what I will now define as *cultural segregation*. As Du Bois’s “Of the Coming of John” illustrates the vexed process of moving from old to new, it illuminates the equally vexed phenomenon of integration that is often assumed to under-gird it. If, as I will argue, the transition from old to new Negro is, in Du Bois’s story, a ‘failed’ one, then it is arguably an example of the ‘failure’ of integration as well. In *To Wake the Nations*, Eric Sundquist describes “Of the Coming of John” as a “dramatization” of the “generational change from ‘Old to “new Negro’” that is, accordingly, an illustration of “the paradox of double consciousness” (473). And in “The Veil Transcended: Form and Meaning in W.E.B. Du Bois’s ‘The Souls of Black Folk,’” Stanley Brodwin’s description of Du Bois and his literary creation, John, as exemplars of the arduous attempt of black intellectuals to “channel [their] natural abilities and personal aims into political and social arenas where they could best be used to achieve civil rights and human dignities” (303) might be

usefully punctuated by Arnold Rampersad's comment that "Of the Coming of John" "elaborates the duality of the black soul" (75). For the dilemma of the newly educated, cultured, and parity-seeking black subject arises not only from her continued exposure to injustice but also, from the phenomenon of double consciousness by which she is subjected to a cognitive tension marked by her adaptation to—or even appropriation of—a putatively "white" (Euro-American) culture.

If integration is not necessarily the proper tool with which to combat accommodation to a racist and racialist social order, if it presupposes neither economic nor psychological emancipation for blacks, then an alternative method of achieving such emancipation must be considered. Alain Locke's call for a *truer* form of spiritual emancipation for the "New Negro" devolves, in the texts of some New Negro practitioners, into a depiction of the possibilities for voluntary, cultural segregation. Du Bois's real-life position on the concept of segregation was varied and complex. As Du Bois's principal biographer David Levering Lewis attests, at the time of Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech, Du Bois would have approved of it, believing that separate but equal accommodation to racist social segregation was only a temporary stop on the path to eventual parity for blacks (175). By the 1903 publication of *Souls*, Du Bois was openly critical of Washington's accommodationist plan, avowing its failure as a strategy of pro-black liberation. But by 1934, Du Bois had again shifted his position on segregation – or perhaps just revealed the nuances of it. For example, in "Separation and Self-Respect," which appeared in the March 1934 issue of *The Crisis*, Du Bois wrote that

“segregation was [once] compulsory; and the only answer to it [...] [is] internal self-organization” (562). And in his 1935 essay “A Negro Nation Within the Nation,” he declared: “...any planning for the benefit of American Negroes [...] is going to involve organized and deliberate self-segregation” (569). As Ross Posnock explains in *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*, “In 1934 Du Bois interrogated the raison d’être of the NAACP—racial integration—and created a storm of controversy that would end only with his resignation. In his blunt view the net result of the quarter-century-long NAACP campaign against segregation had ‘been a little less than nothing,’ and he insisted that integration, the sacred goal that had founded the organization in 1910, must be modified and adapted in the light of what history had revealed...” (124-4). Posnock adds that Du Bois viewed “‘self segregation and self association’” – not as final solutions to the problem of racism but as steps towards the ultimate erasure of the color line. Ultimately, Posnock characterizes Du Bois’s varying and seemingly contradictory views on cultural segregation as proffering a “logic of paradox” (126). In this paper, I will query the implications of such paradoxical thinking as it appears in “Of the Coming of John,” analyzing his treatment of the relative merits both of integration and cultural segregation.

The chief site of integration in Du Bois’s short story is the New York City music hall in which his protagonist, John, enjoys a performance of Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin*. Critics including Playthell Benjamin, David Lewis, Wilson Moses, and Eric Sundquist characterize Du Bois as, in Sundquist’s words, “an avid Wagnerian” (577). Yet Du Bois’s

allusion to Wagner is much more than a reprisal of his own experience of integration as a graduate student in Germany and his subsequent acquaintance with and appreciation of a particular portion of Western European cultural history; for, as Russell Berman remarks in his essay “Du Bois and Wagner: Race, Nation, and Culture between the United States and Germany,” “Of the Coming of John” is “a remarkable reworking” of *Lohengrin* (123). Eric Sundquist concurs, submitting that Du Bois’s allusion to *Lohengrin* “...is not the sign of a dilettante, as many of his contemporaries thought, but a carefully chosen analogy for the story’s action” (577).

The story of Wagner’s *Lohengrin* is one of a noble knight, Lohengrin, who culls his own distinctive power and insight to improve the lives of an imperiled people. A summary of the opera is as follows: In tenth century Antwerp (now Belgium), King Henrich arrives in Brabant to assemble an army to protect the Brabantians from an Hungarian invasion. The former Duke of Brabant has died, leaving his two children, Elsa and Gottfried, in the care of the villainous Count Friedrich of Telramund. The count has been given the right to Elsa’s hand in marriage, but she has refused him, and he has instead married Ortrud, the last in a line of pagan princes who ruled over the land before the spread of Christianity. Angry because scorned, Count Telramund has publicly accused Elsa of having murdered her brother (who has mysteriously disappeared) in order that her secret lover might rule Brabant. Summoned before the King to answer her accusers, Elsa appears in a state of rapture and relates her vision of a knight who will come to prove her innocence and lead Brabant to freedom. Shortly after Elsa’s speech, a

boat appears, steered by a swan and inhabited by the knight Lohengrin. Lohengrin asserts Elsa's innocence, and he pledges to marry her and lead the Brabantians. There is, however, one caveat: no one – least of all, Elsa – must ask him his name, where he comes from, or his origin. Elsa happily accepts both Lohengrin and his conditions, and the townspeople follow suit, grateful for their new leader. All goes well until Elsa is persuaded by Ortrud to doubt Lohengrin's nobility. Elsa demands of Lohengrin his name and origin, breaking the spell by which he, who now reveals himself as a descendent of the kingdom of the Holy Grail, can maintain his powers within the human realm. Saddened, he insists that he must leave. The swan returns – ostensibly to carry Lohengrin back with him. But before Lohengrin leaves, the swan sinks below the waters, and when Lohengrin pulls him back up, he has assumed the form of Gottfried, Elsa's presumed-missing brother. Gottfried is then declared the rightful leader of Brabant (for whom Lohengrin predicts nationalist victory), the triumphant tone of which is diminished by Elsa's mourning of Lohengrin, who has disappeared into the sea in a boat now steered by a dove (Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Vienna State Opera Chorus and Philharmonic, Decca, 1987).

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The parallels between “Of the Coming of John” and *Lohengrin* are substantive: both narratives highlight the work and plight of an exemplary figure who comes from outside a given environment to transform and redeem it. Although John is originally from Altamaha, his educational experiences and time spent in the North have sufficiently

altered him so as to render him a kind of stranger to his community. Russell Berman notes the “special, world-saving mission” shared by John and Lohengrin, and he points as well to “the theme of justice and judgment” (127) in the stories by Wagner and Du Bois. Observing Wagner’s interest in social and national reform, Berman reveals a side of him as a politically marginal—even radical—figure, which complicates the conventional and damning wisdom about him as a reactionary and a xenophobe.

Although Berman admits that to read Wagner in the context of progressivism or radicalism is to interpret in counter-intuitive fashion, he nevertheless contends that Du Bois’s use of *Lohengrin* as an inter-text for “Of the Coming of John” discloses the opera’s unanticipated investment in the notion of “egalitarianism” (128). In this sense, Berman refers not so much to the biographical facts about Wagner but to his *opera* – to its interpretation as an instrument of social revolution and innovation. The capacity of art—in this case, music—to challenge and inspire is a cornerstone of Wagner’s aesthetic theory and a recognized constituent of his work in the body of criticism about his operas; and it resounds as well in Du Bois’s “John.” I will return to detail the specific implications of the role played by aestheticism in the shaping of social reform. For now, I wish to analyze the theme of egalitarianism, as it emerges in *Lohengrin*. As Russell Berman points out, the opera’s egalitarianism is expressed in Lohengrin’s interdiction against probing into his background. When Lohengrin insists that neither Elsa nor the people of Brabant ask “”woher ich kam der Fahrt, / noch wie mein Nam’ und Art!,”” submits Berman, he prohibits not “curiosity or inquisitiveness, or knowledge in general

[...], but a very specific set of data—place of origin, personal identity, and family background—is to be excluded from consideration as criteria for judgment” (129). I concur—at least in part—with Berman’s assertion that Du Bois was no doubt attracted to the possibility of judging identity without recourse to family, racial, or national background. The legacy of *Lohengrin*—its place within Du Bois’s imagination—might reasonably be assumed to stem from Du Bois’s investment in the promise of universalism.

Nevertheless, Du Bois’s narrative suggests the limits—on more than one level—of universalism. The limitations posed by a model of New Negro identity based on the ethos of universalism, an apparent by-product of integration, are revealed first and foremost when John is expelled from the music-hall—essentially, for having been caught “listening while black”—before he can even finish viewing the opera. (As I will go on to explain, this does not prevent him from fully enjoying what little he is permitted to hear of it.) Yet, although Du Bois is concerned to underscore the hypocrisy of northern progressivism—a New York City usher kowtows to the whims of a white southern “gentleman” (coincidentally, a childhood playmate of John’s) in expelling John from the theater—he is as concerned to address the more subtle register of intra-racial tension and the ensuing secondary instantiation of double consciousness. For when John returns home, inspired by his encounter with *Lohengrin* to lead his community towards glory, they reject him – initially because he seems cold, unhappy, and aloof, and ultimately, because he inveighs against their practice of religious factionalism, advising them that it

matters not whether a man is a Baptist or a Methodist, “or indeed a churchman at all, so long as he is good and true” and instructing them to “look higher” (Du Bois, 149). John’s critique of religious factionalism flouts the authority of the biblical, the key significance of which is that it flouts a familiar structuring device for black identity. The impossibility of ascertaining just *where* a higher glance should land evokes the inscrutable and transcendental registers of universalism and engenders within the black community a palpable anxiety about the proper parameters of black identity.

Thus, if the black community can be said to doubt the value of a model of black identity formed in the wake of integration, they can equally—paradoxically—be said to evince skepticism towards a narrative (and a particular one, at that) of cultural (self) segregation. Both reflecting and anticipating Du Bois’s own methods of leadership, John’s instruction to his community is made in the service of strengthening them as a collective unit (or in Du Bois’s 1935 parlance, a “nation within a nation”), providing them with the tools to revolt against the racist and racialist social order of a legally segregated America. John punctuates his novel proscriptions for the black community with a lesson about the French Revolution (for which he is termed “a dangerous nigger” and fired by the white leaders of his community), proffering the merits of a democratically imbued form of cultural nationalism and underscoring, as well, the more familiar reading of Wagner’s *Lohengrin* as a nationalist narrative. Here, one can see the operation of what I, extrapolating from Ross Posnock, term a dialectic of integration and segregation. Du Bois’s John is the product of an “integrated” experience, yet he places

his cosmopolitan wisdom in the service of a particularized form of black nationalism.

This form of black nationalism is mediated as much by its specific philosophical correlates as it is by the fact that it ensues in the wake of cosmopolitanism. Upon what forms of thought does this particular form of black nationalism depend? Recall that the site of John's integrated experience is not simply the viewing of an opera but the feeling of aesthetic transport. The passage in which Du Bois describes John's reception of Wagner's opera is one of the most lyrical in the story, and it is marked by an aesthetic discourse. John repeatedly describes the scene of the music hall including the architecture, the people, and the performance itself as "beautiful." Yet it is Du Bois's description of the effect of *Lohengrin* on John that best expresses aestheticism. Du Bois perfectly describes the phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure when he writes of *Lohengrin* that it "put [s] [John's body] all a-tune" (147). Recasting aesthetic pleasure as the exercise of *aesthetic judgment* by which it is presupposed allows me to consider the philosophical implications of John's encounter with Wagner's music. As characterized by Immanuel Kant, whose writings were studied by Du Bois at Harvard and whose aesthetic philosophy has been broadly influential, aesthetic judgment, the expression of taste that is the designation of beauty, is—although not characterized as a sensual experience—a non-rational and a-conceptual one. This is because aesthetic judgment, the by-product of harmonious exchange between the cognitive faculties of understanding and imagination, is irreducible to a definitive concept. As Ronald Judy affirms in his work (*Dis*) *Forming the American Canon: African-Arab Slave Narratives and the*

Vernacular, “For Kant, aesthetic judgment is not subsumable under a concept of understanding, and so cannot be objectively validated” (25). The a-conceptual and therefore indeterminate quality of the aesthetic judgment recalls the intuitive and anti-deterministic type of judgment proffered by Lohengrin and John. This anti-deterministic mode is the very source of the universalism that under-girds both the egalitarianism in *Lohengrin* and the particular brand of nationalism in Du Bois’s text.

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In the final analysis, Du Bois’s appropriation of Wagner’s text suggests a dialectic of universalism and nationalism, in which the enterprise of national development is mediated by its derivation from an anti-deterministic discourse. The negative reaction of John’s community to his aesthetically imbued program of cultural nationalism reflects the ambivalence surrounding the authority of the black artist or aesthete to become a black leader as well as the crisis over the formal parameters of black leadership during the New Negro Renaissance and beyond. While it is clear that debates about the relative merits of integration and voluntary, cultural segregation are really about the overarching debate over which particular forms black identity should take, it is not yet fully apparent how such a debate is illuminated by constructing a fuller account of aestheticism’s role in the production of (black) subjectivity.

I wish to contrast this voluntary segregation with socio-political segregation, of either the *de jure* or the *de facto* sort.

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